

WE ARE FROM NICODEMUS

Deanna Bowen



March 21 - April 27, 2019

Curated by The Family Camera Network
at McIntosh Gallery

We Are From Nicodemus, 2017, single-channel video, 39 minutes

All images used are from the video. Images courtesy of the artist.

Artist Biography

Deanna Bowen is an interdisciplinary artist based in Toronto. She is a descendant of African Americans who migrated from Kansas to Alberta, Canada, over one hundred years ago, and her research-based practice explores counter narratives of slavery and migration. Bowen holds a Master's Degree in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto (2008) and is a graduate of the Emily Carr College of Art and Design (1994). She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (2016) and the William H. Johnson Prize (2014). Her work has been exhibited and screened in Canada and internationally.

Black Determinism: Movement, Trauma, and Aspiration in *We Are From Nicodemus*

by Ramolen Laruan

“I can’t see how I would be able to go forward and survive—even thrive ... if I didn’t go back,” begins Canadian artist Deanna Bowen while driving on the highway to Nicodemus, Kansas, where her ancestors once settled. In *We Are From Nicodemus* (2017), Bowen (b. 1969) traces her genealogy back to African-American migrants from the US Midwest to Alberta in the 1900s. This forty-five-minute video is part of a larger project entitled *An Exoduster’s Archive*, in which the artist geographically and genealogically remaps her maternal lineages from the post-Reconstruction Exoduster Movement route to the Canadian Prairies and the present day. While researching her family history, Bowen found a photograph of Elizabeth Risby Williams, her distant great aunt, which led her to the all-Black township of Nicodemus. Through eight interviews, the video records Bowen’s first meeting with her cousin Angela Bates, Elizabeth’s great-granddaughter, who has spent twenty-five years preserving family and town history. Bowen’s opening statement reflects her own commitment to researching her family history through a relationship of self with an identity of place. *We Are From Nicodemus* manifests the memories that geography holds for Bowen, who undergoes a process of self-realization presented in the genre of the road movie.

I encountered *We Are From Nicodemus* in the McIntosh Gallery at Western University, part of a special exhibition curated by The Family Camera Network (FCN), a collaborative research project that collects family photographs and oral histories related to migration to and within Canada.¹ In focusing on migrant stories through family photography as a social and cultural practice, FCN “incorporate[s] both questions and analysis concerning feelings, emotion, and affect as part of [their] approach” in an attempt to fill gaps in collecting practices.² Bowen’s story of tracing her family history to what was once the largest coloured colony in America fits with FCN’s mandate because it is a story that is “ridiculously sentimental,” according to Bowen.³ Bowen looks inward and to the past to explore the self through art-making, linking the ongoing effects of colonization with globalization. Both FCN and Deanna Bowen support autobiography as an entry point

¹FAMCAM: The Family Camera Network, “The Family Camera Network,” [familycamera.org](http://family-cameranetwork.org/), <http://family-cameranetwork.org/> [accessed January 24, 2019].

²Thy Phu, Elspeth H. Brown, and Deepali Dewan, “The Family Camera Network”. *Photography and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2017): 153.

³Deanna Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus* Interview with Ramolen Laruan. Skype, January 28, 2019.

into issues of globalization through migration and the affective turn. It is my intention here to reflect their practices in light of my own experience as a child of first-generation immigrants, as well as a migrant myself. This is not to say that my experience of migration is the same as what Bowen reveals in *We Are From Nicodemus*, but rather that I share feelings of loss and unbelonging, as well as the obligation to remember and document histories, as one who also lives in a diaspora. In order to bring affective subjectivity into larger sociopolitical, geographical, and cultural crises, I intend to ground myself in an ethics of care where we are beholden to each other, look to challenge the ways in which Black bodies are represented and framed in the arts and academia, and move toward a decolonial future. By uncovering sites of African North American determination mediated through the road movie genre, *We Are From Nicodemus* reveals the unexpected effects of displacement, recovers stories of migrant resilience, and makes promises to the future as an attentive guardian of and for Black bodies.

At the time that Bowen's family migrated to and settled in Nicodemus, two major mass-produced technological products appeared that would alter people's being in the world: the car and the camera. It is in this historical context that the road movie emerged, displaying the ways in which democratic access to the car and camera reshaped our relationship to space and time.⁴ Rapid locomotion reconfigured the modern subject's relationship to mobility, connecting people to distant places, while media motion supported the display of these relations in the collapse of space and time onto one screen. What happens on the road is reflected in the process of film. In his book *Driving Visions*, film scholar David Laderman calls attention to the long sequence point-of-view shot of the driver, which creates a relationship between cinema and the car. It is perhaps the "mechanical and ontological kinship between the car and camera" that makes road movies emblematic of the phenomenon of globalization (Figure 1).⁵ The closing of space and time through the car and camera reflect the interconnected politics, economy and culture across the world that became prominent at this time and is further intensified today. These connections between history and technology, between the car and cinema, are further amplified in *We Are From Nicodemus* where the moving image and cultural mobility mediate the particular familial migration Bowen discloses. Bowen develops the relationship between the histories of the camera and the car—the camera captures movement and the car literally moves one from one place to another—both inherently speaking about movement itself, but with a critical engagement that seeks to implicate the technological advancement of modernity with a greater awareness of its social costs. As the protagonists in road movies desire

⁴Walter Moser, "Presentation The Road Movie: A Genre from a Modern Constellation of Locomotion and Mediamotion," *Cinemas* 18, no. 2–3 (2008).

⁵David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 256.

to break away from traditions and look for opportunities by crossing borders, there is a paradoxical motion whereby leaving security also means a greater yearning for nostalgia. Throughout the video, Bowen creates a dialogue between the camera and narrative, and car and mobility to *move* viewers with a story of movement. In other words, the motion created by the medium is not only concerned with sharing her family's migration; *We Are From Nicodemus* elicits an *emotional* response as we journey with Bowen to discover time, space, and history.



Figure 1. A driver's perspective of Deanna Bowen on her way to Nicodemus, Kansas.

African-Americans are especially shaped by migration. Bowen traces the movements of her relations to the extended Kentucky/Kansas Exoduster migrations and the all-Black towns of Oklahoma and the Creek Negroes (Black Indians), and to the Black Prairie pioneers of Alberta and Saskatchewan with whom her great-great-great-grandparents first settled in Canada. In *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*, historian Nell Irvin Painter outlines the precarity of Blacks living in the post-emancipation South. Although the internal great migrations that Bowen's family joined in search of new opportunities were voluntary, the economic, social, and political structures they lived under meant Blacks were always already defeated despite their efforts in agriculture, politics, and social life. In the book, Painter includes a quote from a black migrant who explained to a journalist,

There are no words which can fully express or explain the real condition of my people throughout the south, nor how deeply and

keenly they feel the necessity of fleeing from the wrath and long pent-up hatred of their old masters which they feel assured will ere long burst loose like the pent-up fires of a volcano and crush them if they remain here many years longer.⁶

Black migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were founded on the belief that a position of true equality could never be achieved in the South.⁷ Bowen's family was one of many Black families who fled the repressive environment of the Reconstruction era to create new settlements like Nicodemus. Migration provided the hope of new destinations—places to ground free Black communities; migration was *necessary* for survival in conditions of racial violence and segregation.



Figure 2. Angela Bates giving a tour of Nicodemus.

Following the Civil War, the belief in millenarism became popular for many African-Americans, which Bowen highlights on the tour with Angela. Historian Nell Irving Painter examines millenarism in American history through the Afro-American Exodus to Kansas in the late nineteenth century to explore African-American conviction for a better circumstance. Painter writes, “A reporter called the Exodus ‘a kind of migratory epidemic;’ while another termed it ‘a sport of religious exaltation, during which they had regarded Kansas as a modern Canaan and the God-appointed home of the negro race (Figure 2).”⁸

⁶Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1992), 185.

⁷Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf, *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (Washington D.C: National Geographic Society, 2005), 65.

⁸Nell Irvin Painter, “Millenarian Aspects of the Exodus to Kansas of 1879,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (1976): 336.

The migration was termed an “Exodus” in reference to the Jewish people’s flight from Egypt in the Old Testament; the people who partook in the journey were labeled Exodusters and believed in a new Promised Land. Bowen’s family was one of many Black families that partook in multiple migrations in search for the Promised Land, first to Nicodemus, then going North where they eventually arrived in Canada. During the tour of the town, Angela Bates shows Bowen photographs of “Children of the Promised Land,” and a few seconds later a series of portraits of the “First and Second Generation of Nicodemus children born free” appears (Figure 3). Bates reports on a number of all African-American towns like Nicodemus: nearly a dozen in Kansas, twenty-six in Oklahoma, and at least one each in Colorado and California (Figure 4). Bowen’s tour starts with a proud history, which sets the tone for our understanding of Nicodemus and its people. “Nicodemus is this last standing bastion of all of that question for space and freedom and all those things, the ability to rule your own life,” Bowen notes. “All of those things come from places like this.” As Democrats solidified their rule in Louisiana, however, Nicodemus became a short-lived Promised Land; nevertheless, the belief in millenarism instilled faith for many other land of possibilities —and so the search continued.

The car, the road, and the act of driving indicate a breaking away from the constraints of the driver’s disposition prior to time on the road, thus, all three gesture toward a certain liberation and to the open space of the American landscape.⁹ Road movies emphasize the landscape through long shots of empty land, suggesting an ideological framework that is reminiscent of a belief in the frontier, the “manifest destiny” carried over from another American genre popular before road movies, the Western. *We Are From Nicodemus* begins with this formula; Bowen takes the place of her ancestors looking for comfort in and through the environment.¹⁰ However, unlike the colonial hunger of the Western and the road movie, Bowen today, like her family many years before, seeks to find community in response to colonial subjugation. As many Black communities flowed to Kansas, they established small colonies of which Nicodemus became the most famous. During prosperous times in the 1880s, Nicodemus had a population of about seven hundred.¹¹ The town was confronted with many problems, however, such as overpopulation, threats from neighbouring white towns, and agricultural collapse. Then the victory of Southern Democrats in the 1878 elections threatened Black communities, forcing another urgent attempt to leave these established communities. In Bowen’s film, static long takes introduce Nicodemus through a series of structures in varying landscapes that indicate signs of habitation but never show life in the frame.

⁹Moser, “Presentation The Road Movie.”

¹⁰Neil Archer, *The Road Movie: In Search of Meaning* (London: Wallflower, 2016), 23–24.

¹¹Painter, *Exodusters*, 150.



Figure 3. Deanna Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus*, video still, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Inside the Nicodemus National Historic Site Visitor Centre.

We find signs of life in the newly mowed grass, stretched farmed lands, freshly painted buildings, unmoving cars, and the sound of animals that provide the soundtrack to what otherwise looks like a ghost town (Figure 5). Do these images show a place unable to keep up with the advance of contemporary life or one that, in the gentle stir of its movements, has survived all perils that came its way? All the promise and failure of modernity are embodied in the eight-minute montage of Nicodemus landscape. While speaking about the movements of her ancestors, Bowen also focuses on her role in the present, critiquing the ongoing effects of migration. *We Are From Nicodemus* appropriates technological history and the cinematographic pattern of the road movie to visualize history by demonstrating nuanced conceptions of migration as a tether between the coercive and the voluntary, as well as the symbolic hope and resilience of Nicodemus during many difficult times. A combination of images and language confirms Nicodemus as a refuge for freed people with Bates and Bowen as the living vitality of slaves freed many generations before. The original settlers of Nicodemus believed the town to be their Promised Land; however, the uncertain political climate of the South would provide other forced opportunities for “homing desires.” The family does not stay in Nicodemus because of growing threats, so the Black settlement is a utopian moment when they could live without the racism they confronted elsewhere in America. Bowen goes to Nicodemus in search of this utopia.



Figure 6. Deanna Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus*, video still, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Deanna Bowen and Angela Bates visiting the cemetery.

The term “homing desires” comes from Avtar Brah who argues that to leave home means to create a “desired home” in the politics of diaspora. As a result, the notion of homing desires asserts that home can be constructed outside of a person’s place of origin.¹² It is the possibility of a new home that is suspended on the journey to finding a stable base in which home can be a place of origin as well as a place where migrants decide to regroup themselves and construct new identities. With the purpose of challenging the definition of the African-American diaspora as a forceful driving of Blacks out of the South, I want to position migration as a hopeful exploration of a collective desire. “The important history in terms of what people did with their freedom is exemplary in the town,” Bates declares. That the tenacity of Bowen’s ancestors has been preserved owes much to Bates, and now to Bowen, whose personal desire “to understand where the Risbys come from” has created another form of documenting a home. Nicodemus is not an abstract symbol of African-American ambition, it was and is a site where Bowen’s family created a place of their own before they had to leave, again. Bowen reflects,

It makes me want to adopt those values again, because I just see how much of a long-standing legacy it is. And that loss of family, community, connection is a lot of the reason why we fall apart. We’re not completely ... but you know what I mean ... We fell apart.

Today, her family is scattered across different cities, losing the traditional stabilized structure of family and community. Appropriately, Bowen has gone back to a place where

¹²Anne Marie Fortier, “Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment,” in *Uprootings/Re-groundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg Publisher, 2003), 115–17.

a sense of community and traditional family is present. There she meets a cousin who tells her about the great distances the Risbys have scattered, though Bates and Bowen do not dwell on suffering but instead reflect on the family's survival despite its dispersion. This focus is notably illustrated in the cemetery where Bates and Bowen contemplate and celebrate connections between the people they know today and those who have passed away (Figure 6). Despite several migrations, thousands of miles, and many years from one another, Bates and Bowen reconcile time, space, and histories in the video.

I intend to complicate the idea of homing desires by implicating the artist into the narrative and considering her own displacement in a series of movements that first started on the Atlantic. Although Bowen did not experience the slave-era and the persistent search for home post-emancipation, her family's multiple violent experiences of being uprooted continue to affect her profoundly. If the homeland is the body of the individual and the collective, how does the sense of loss and rupture of self and body transfer to children many homes later? While migration provided an opportunity to traverse boundaries and break from oppressive environments, the compressed time and space afforded by modernity resulted in psychological consequences and physical distance for family members generations later. Despite the moving narrative of road movies, the desire for stability and history is at the core. *We Are From Nicodemus* and the genre it borrows from are concerned with moving by transcending space and arriving at a destination, yet this is also done by longing for the past. The way forward is through longing for the past, perhaps in the understanding that one's action about the past is only limited to nostalgia. Through the monologue in the beginning which announces her intent to go back, we become aware of her struggles in her own life as she only starts to undo the shame she feels about her past and attempts to, in her own words, "give the family back some glory" in order to finally move forward. Similar to other road movie protagonists, Bowen admits that she is hoping to alter her perspective through displacement and the search for knowledge. Given that home can be both a place of origin and a destination, being on the road opens up utopian possibilities through the different experiences of the protagonist.¹³ "I am an Exoduster in a sense, because I am constantly seeking out another hospitable landscape," Bowen says in an interview.¹⁴ In *Nicodemus*, Bowen withdraws from the hostile dystopia of her current family life and travels into possibilities of knowledge and community. However, throughout this video there is a sense that Bowen may never find "true" home. The idea that displaced people can create home elsewhere—not fixed in one place— makes home a social construct that does not depend on geography but on the

¹³Archer, *The Road Movie*, 15.

¹⁴ Deanna Bowen, "Difficult Histories: An Interview with Deanna Bowen." Interview by Michèle Pearson Clarke, *No More Potlucks* 44 (2016): <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/difficult-histories-an-interview-with-deanna-bowen-michele-pearson-clarke/> [accessed February 10, 2019].

memories and traditions carried by people wherever they go.¹⁵ As a result, in the quest for her origins, Bowen replaces the desire for home with meaningful remembrance of and embodied encounters with geography and family members. “[Nicodemus] lives in us, breathes in us. It’s not just the place, it’s wherever we are. We take it with us,” Bates reassures us. Being on the road explores the interrelationship between identity, border, and cross-cultural context, where we trust that Bowen will gain a transformed understanding of her hybrid identity. As Bowen traverse borders, we recognize that the search for cultural roots only amplifies the stretched boundaries of identity caused by migration.¹⁶

Before examining the ways in which Bowen participates in acts of healing by excavating, understanding, and then sharing her family history and current predicament, it is necessary to position her methodologies in the making of *We Are From Nicodemus* within trauma studies discourse. The experiences and memories of her family, employed in autobiographical storytelling, provides the framework for a story rooted in acts of refusal of dominant historical writing and the conviction of a personal narrative that hinges on hope and survival. Bowen adopts the words of Holocaust scholar and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who explains that “a new generation of innocent children removed enough from the experience are needed to create meaningful remembrances that uncover and re-speak difficult histories.” This project demands a meaningful relationship to the subject that can offer a productive means of unlearning and relearning the ways in which we understand the past. Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon writes:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.... The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation’s legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people.¹⁷

Bowen understands that the act of liberation is connected to self-knowledge as it relates to the individual and the collective body of her people when she says:

I guess I’m trying to make peace with the childhood that I had, and I need to understand who these people were.... They were really, really tired: spiritually tired, physical tired. I certainly did not have them at the best of their abilities, so I would like to better understand who they were.... So I’m looking for some peace.

In addition to speaking to family members and digging through the archive, it is also vital for Bowen to walk in the places her ancestors once inhabited. As a narrator, author, and artist, Bowen’s determination to interpret complex histories through emotion and to demand affective responses is essential for correcting fallacies in witnessing, family gossip, and written history.

¹⁵Fortier, “Making Home,” 121.

¹⁶Archer, *The Road Movie*, 85.

¹⁷Frantz Fanon, Richard Philcox, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2017), 210–11.

Consequently, Bowen's research goes beyond official histories and into the personal. Though this method is voluntary, Bowen reveals that the excavation of history through personal traumas is a beautiful, painful, and crucial process of reorganizing her story.

Bowen, however, complicates the task of retracing and sharing her family history by acknowledging the difficulties of understanding the past, especially traumatic histories. This complexity is presented through the divided organizational structure of the narrative, which reflects Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic model. Caruth argues that the unintelligible nature of trauma makes accessing the past difficult for trauma "does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully known."¹⁸ Though the outcome of trauma is ever evolving, going back to history and recovering is always concerned with trauma.¹⁹ Because traumatic memories obscure recall, the only truth in history is its incomprehensibility. Bowen had to look for her family history elsewhere because her family did not want to retell it. The broken narrative structure of the film presents information in a way that transforms the inability to fully disclose a collective historical narrative into visuals. Bowen gives us access but does not let us linger. We are invited into the tour, the conversations, and the psyche in the middle of a thought, then we are directed to another. Film allows this collapse of structure without making us uncomfortable or even realizing that this is happening, because, as people who are constantly bombarded by images, we have been trained to make sense of the incomprehensible and to make narrative out of singular pieces. This is how collage works, and a montage is a moving collage. In his book *Road Movies*, David Orgeron further explains the cutting in montage or what Charles Musser and André Gaudreault might call the "second layer of narrativity," in which the cutting "facilitates motion, elongating, restructuring, and hyperbolizing it."²⁰ The home-movie quality in *We Are From Nicodemus*, characterised by one perspective that records a short event, is structured through short scenes that allows another layer of emotional affect beyond what is included in the frame. Overall, Bowen utilizes the *mise en scène* to highlight a traumatic psychological disposition that is implicated in the attempt to commemorate the past. On the road of discovery with Bowen, we too are guided to explore history and geography, time and place, movement and memory, all of which we never entirely grasp. Understanding that the past can never be fully recalled, Bowen nonetheless takes on the challenge, permitting her personal story—her family's story—to serve as a point of departure for finding new ways to visualize traumatic histories.

In speaking about trauma through autobiography, Bowen examines the state of subjection of Black life across spatiotemporal boundaries. Bowen finds significance in the past as she continues to feel its force in the present. I want to consider Christina Sharpe's notion of "the wake," from her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, for the ways in which the past

¹⁸Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁰Devine Orgeron, *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 17.

ruptures the present.²¹ Living as a Black person in the wake is a multilayered experience of belonging that is akin to being in the wake of a boat, keeping watch over the dead, and being politically aware of Black subjection. Sharpe argues that Black lives are lived in the afterlife of slavery, where the oppression of slavery persists in the present day through different structures. We often forget that the Transatlantic slave trade was one of a series of blows that brought many Africans into the Americas, though Bowen does not necessarily mention slavery, nor does she have to. By retaining this information, Bowen forces her viewers to be attentive to the long history of structural anti-Blackness that continues its legacy in the present day and in Bowen's body. The anecdotes she shares about her childhood exemplify the repeating manner in which the past is our present. Many generations after her ancestors boarded ships and suffered enslavement, Bowen is laden with the aftereffects of violent dislocation and subjugation. *We Are From Nicodemus* brings into light violent histories and the darkness they continue to cast upon the people who bear them, thus restoring agency to those who have suffered and are suffering.

Sharpe contextualizes contemporary Black suffering in the long history of structural anti-blackness wherein the notion of "the wake" recognizes the repetitions that suggest Black lives are moving toward death, and she outlines various modes of resistance to insist on Black lives living. In addition to revealing psychological and intergenerational trauma in the video, Bowen utilizes the road movie format to disturb colonial archives of Black narratives and thereby tend to Black bodies. Bowen applies the methodologies highlighted by Sharpe to create "wake work" addressing ontological Blackness. Wake work is a form of underwriting that gathers different instances of terror recorded in the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" across history and in the present day.²² Nicodemus as a site records the horrors that Black bodies have suffered. At the same time, the video connects violent histories with survival through the very existence of descendants on the land. The aesthetic of wake work is manifest as unresolved solutions that shows the "impossibility of solving antiblackness."²³ This is considered in the incomprehensibility displayed by Bowen in addressing trauma with the cinematic medium—it is difficult to access the truth of history. Caruth's theories about trauma and Sharpe's notion of the wake echo an ongoing state of turbulence for traumatized Black subjects. Moreover, wake work is evident in the layers of writing and imagery that convey the experience of a being in constant negotiation "to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."²⁴ Although the layers of underwriting are seen in the editing of the video, they are most evident in themes of globalization, modernity, and identity. So even in suffering, Bowen, nevertheless, triumphs as she walks free in a world that once enslaved her people. This is the importance of living in the wake. Wake work ruptures

²¹Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 41.

²²*Ibid.*, 15.

²³Tala Khanmalek, "In the Wake: On Blackness and Being," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies Transition/Transgress* 18, no. 1 (2018): 56.

²⁴Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13–14.

the “immanent and imminent” death of Black lives; we are encouraged to inhabit and find resistance and hope in Black narratives.²⁵ Most importantly, being in the wake requires a new consciousness that opposes the redaction of Black life, where we uphold an ethics of care over melancholy for dead and living bodies.

This approach is maintained by the Family Camera Network, in Bowen’s practice and in this analysis, all of which are concerned with working against deathly patterns in pursuit of the promise of being. While looking to the past, Bowen cares for the narrative of her family and for Black life in the present. Because cultural productions are vital for representing history, Bowen not only critiques the absence of Black bodies in mainstream history but also works toward decolonizing the archive by documenting the trauma that she and her family still experience yet uphold to tell a story of resilience and to gift the imagination of utopian possibility on screen. Through self-healing, Bowen more broadly gives back what Black narratives are deprived of—enduring family lineages and living Black bodies—despite repeated colonial sufferings passed down from one generation to another.

We Are From Nicodemus is not only a work that inspires how we look forward to the future, it is most importantly a document in the archive that challenges how we see other histories, thus confronting all other documents that may exist there. Sharpe defines this mode of resistance as aspiration—putting breath back into the body by challenging violent representations and the constant victimhood of the Black community.²⁶ *We Are From Nicodemus* employs the openness of the film medium to subvert what exists in the archive by implicating “emotion” into mediamotion. *We Are From Nicodemus* elicits the affective ability of film—especially feelings of sympathy, empathy, and responsibility—as we spend time in Nicodemus and with its people. Bowen takes the expectation in a road movie of being transported from one place to another further to a shift in our subconscious. The video appeals to our emotions, ultimately creating pathos, and persuading the viewers to empathize with Black stories. The choice to appropriate the popular genre of the road movie advances this connection through familiarity, allowing various demographics to understand the narrative of the story in the image society. Moreover, the video format allows for easy distribution so the story can be easily shared with other family members and everyone else. Although I encountered the video in a gallery, Bowen intends for it to be disseminated freely, to connect to as many people as possible.²⁷ In the meantime, the gallery context provides an intimate space where one or two people at a time witness a deeply personal story mediated through affect. The artist understands art’s ability to address diverse groups about difficult issues. Under these circumstances, wake work is not exclusive to artists or Black subjects; we are all capable of engaging more critically with the narratives presented to us and the narratives we share. *We Are From Nicodemus* is an ideal example of what it means to take responsibility for stories that

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 109.

²⁷Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus* Interview with Ramolen Laruan.

continue to affect people today and to aspire to something greater for these stories.

Through the cinematic form of the road movie, Bowen shares the unexpected effects of migration and displacement inherited from slavery, and the processes through which one may heal from family separation, psychological traumas, systemic trauma, intergenerational trauma, and colonial trauma. In *We Are From Nicodemus*, locomotion, mediamotion, and emotion are carefully organized to present a story of movement, one that is both troubled and hopeful by nature. Undeterred by sociopolitical, economic, or geographical forces, the people who once lived in Nicodemus are remembered by their descendants who are just as determined as they were to create and care for spaces of belonging. Travelling to a place of Black determination acknowledges the strength possessed by the dispossessed and gives a unique perspective on the people and stories of the past. Bowen is released from wondering and gains a new appreciation of the sacrifices that her family made. Although *We Are From Nicodemus* is driven by a personal intention to find family, the Risby's story of movement links to a greater diaspora, further challenging national narratives of migration in which the protection of Black bodies is central to the method. We are reminded that violent histories of rule over Black people continue to affect people today, yet Bowen persists in reflecting on the fortitude demonstrated in dispersal and survival. In my interview with Bowen, she mentioned that the gallery allows her to write and tell the story that she wants through art. Bowen envisions what could be by conjuring displacements and traumas from the past. As she works to unravel the histories she has inherited, the onus is also on all of us to demand stories that are not limited to facts or opinions. I believe that there is space for research to consider affective subjectivity as a place where we can begin to explore alternative avenues, advocate for marginalized experiences, and nurture all communities. *We Are From Nicodemus* shows that history is not stable; sometimes all it takes to unsettle the past is for one person with an intense desire to return and re-examine the possibilities of bringing the body back to life.



Figure 6. Deanna Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus*, video still, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

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